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The English language and the people who speak it

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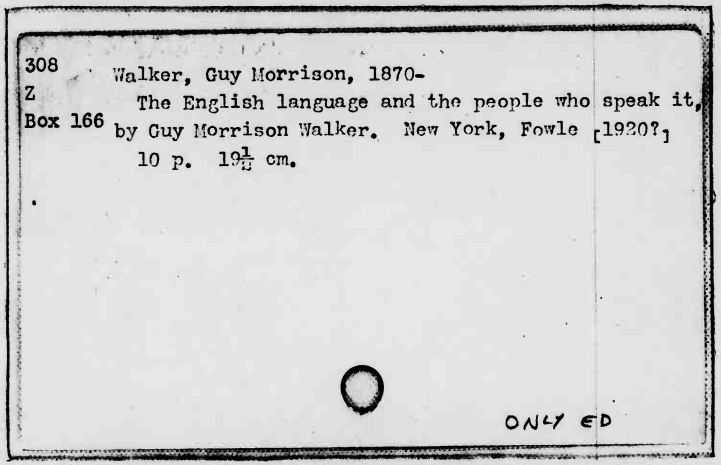

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The English Language and The People Who Speak It

By
Guy Morrison Walker

A. L. Fowle, *Publisher*
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The English Language and The People who Speak It

The French have been complaining that the Versailles Treaty covering the peace with Germany and the League of Nations, provided that the English text of the Treaty should be regarded as the official text. For upwards of four hundred years almost all treaties except those between English-speaking nations, have been written in two languages, one of which was French, and the French text declared to be the official one.

With the French language recognized for so many centuries as the language of diplomacy, it has come as a shock to the French people that world affairs have progressed in such a manner that the position of the French language in the world has been lost. The adoption of English as the official text calls attention to a condition in world affairs that is likely to attract considerable attention within the next few years.

The adoption of the English text as the official text of this World Treaty is a recognition that English is to be the language of International relations throughout the world, as it is the language of industry, of business, of commerce, and of finance.

The development of the sciences of transportation and communication in the past hundred years and the extraordinary expansion of industry, of international commerce and trade as the result has made the race that had the greatest capacity in this line the dominant race in the world.

In 1780 the English-speaking race only numbered 11,000,000 souls, and their commerce was but a small fraction of the commerce of the world. Spain had twice as many people as England; France more than three times as many; the territory of the German Empire nearly three times as many; even Holland and Belgium rivaled Great Britain in population and in wealth. But the English-speaking race invented the steam engine and developed its use. The English-speaking race invented the steamships and steam railroads, and then electric railroads, and then telegraph and cables, and telephones, and submarines and aeroplanes. The English-speaking race has been the inventor and developer of the means of transportation and communication of the world, and it has on that account been also the developer of commerce and trade and of the financial devices for handling them.

By reason of their development of trade and finance the English-speaking people have been the ones that created the vocabulary of trade

and finance. English is, if you please, the original language of transportation, of communication, of commerce and finance, and when the Frenchman attempted to follow he had to invent some Gallic equivalent or synonym which might or might not express the meaning of the English original. When the Germans undertook to translate the terms of modern industry, finance and commerce from their English originals into German it became necessary to invent some of the most extraordinary German compound words, many of them entirely arbitrary and many of them failing completely to convey, even to a German mind, the meaning of the transaction described or expressed in the English original. The result has been that from the beginning of the modern era the German and the Frenchman and the Italian and the Spaniard who attempted to do foreign business in his own language was more or less handicapped by the failure of his own language to express or convey the meaning of the original phrase covering the transaction or describing the character of the business.

While the Chinese have a written language intelligible throughout the confines of the Republic, its spoken dialects are so numerous and so unintelligible to the different parts of

their own country that the educated Chinese already find it more convenient to communicate with each other in English than to try their local dialects.

I remember some years ago being asked to lecture on railroads before the students of the Railroad College in Shanghai. The Young Men's Christian Association agreed to furnish an interpreter. When I arrived at the college I found that the principal of the college was a Chinese educated in English, and when the interpreter announced his readiness to interpret, the Chinese principal laughed and said: "Our students come from all the eighteen provinces of China and there is no man living who could interpret such a lecture into the many different dialects that they speak. This fact has made it so impossible for us to do our instruction work in Chinese that we have been compelled to adopt English as the language of instruction in the college, and no students are admitted unless they are able to speak, write and read English. You may therefore proceed to lecture in English, which is the only language understood by all our students."

The English language is the language of industry, of business, of commerce, and of finance, throughout the world. Nine-tenths of the business and finance of the world today is

done in the English language. It is no longer necessary for those speaking English to learn French, or German, or Russian, or Italian, or Spanish, for the business and finance of the world is so completely dominated by those speaking English that we have compelled the business men and the bankers of all these different nations to learn English, if they want to do any business outside of their own countries. The world interests of the United States and of Great Britain are so immensely greater than those of all other nations that it is folly for Chinese students to waste their time learning other foreign languages. To learn French would open the doors only to the business and financial assistance to be obtained from 40,000,000 French.

The French language is only spoken by about 45,000,000 people out of all the inhabitants on the earth, and the amount of commerce now, or possible in the future, between France and China is small and must always remain comparatively small. On the other hand, the English language is now spoken by over 300,000,000 of the earth's population. It is the widest spoken language in the world. While there are 325,000,000 Hindus, they speak so many different languages that bank notes in Calcutta carry the denomination printed in twelve different lan-

guages, only two of which are the same as those printed on Bombay bank notes. Madras bank notes have the denomination printed in eight different languages, which include five that are not on either the Calcutta or Bombay notes.

The nations speaking Spanish have practically ceased growing and are so backward industrially and so poor that there is small, if any, financial benefit to be found in dealing with them. But to learn English means not only to put those who master English in the way of doing business with the 110,000,000 of people in the United States, and with the now nearly 50,000,000 people in Great Britain, but with the 9,000,000 people in Canada, the 5,000,000 people in Australia, the 10,000,000 people in the Philippines, the 300,000,000 people in India, and the eighty or ninety millions of people in Africa, all of whom recognize English as their language; but it means almost equal facility for doing business with France and Germany, for all the leading bankers and business men in those countries are able to do business almost as well in English as they do in their native tongues.

Neither France nor Germany will be able to furnish any capital for the development of China, South America or Africa for years to come. The nations that have financed, and who

must finance, the reconstruction of Europe are the United States and Great Britain. The countries who must furnish the capital necessary for the development of China and the rest of the world are the United States and Great Britain. Why then should Chinese students waste their time learning French or in seeking an education in France or Germany when they must look to the United States and to Great Britain for all their financial assistance, for the greatest part of their markets, and for their future commerce? Even if an education in the United States or England costs the Chinese students ten times as much as an education in France, it would be worth all the extra cost, because the Chinese student, who is only able to do business in France, will not have one-twentieth the opportunity to do business as will the student who is able to do business in English.

What is most important of all is that their mastery of commerce, trade and international finance is such that the English-speaking races today transact 80 per cent. of all the commerce of the world, and half of the rest of the commerce is transacted in the English language by races that are more or less dominated by the English-speaking peoples. Approximately, therefore, 90 per cent. of the commerce and

finance of the world is done in the English language.

It is plain, therefore, that those nations who engage largely in foreign commerce and trade and who hope to participate in international finance will find their trade and participation in finance facilitated by the adoption, as far as possible, of the English language in connection therewith; and that those nations or people who do so and who can therefore transact their business with the English-speaking races in the original language of commerce and finance will prosper the most, and save themselves from much that handicaps them now in the struggle for survival in world trade, finance and prosperity.

Those races which have learned English for the purpose of facilitating their commerce have prospered and those races, which like the Spaniard and the Portuguese, have clung to their own language, are decadent and dropping behind in wealth, commerce and influence.

All bankers have realized how much the business of the world would be simplified if a single measure of currency or values could be adopted throughout the world, but how much more would commerce and trade and finance be facilitated if it could be done throughout the world in a single language. There would then be no pos-

sibility of errors or mistakes through mistranslation. A uniform vocabulary would have an identical meaning wherever used in the world. It would be, if you please, the first step toward that standardization in product, measurement and description, which so many Chambers of Commerce have sought. And it will be possible to secure the adoption of a single standard of measurement only when there is a single vocabulary in business and trade. The insuperable obstacle to the adoption of the metric system is that its vocabulary is French and the English-speaking people refuse to learn French.

Now, the point to all this is that in her effort to rehabilitate herself in world trade Germany has at the present time an extraordinary opportunity. Let her abandon the barbarous German script and adopt, first, the Roman character which is now used by every Latin race and by the English-speaking races, and, as far as possible, let Germany adopt the English vocabulary and the English language in everything that relates to commerce, finance, banking and business. It will do more to facilitate Germany's rehabilitation than any other single thing. German is spoken nowhere outside of Germany, while approximately 30 per cent. of the German race has already made English its primary

language by immigration to the United States and becoming Americans in nationality though they are German in blood.

For a hundred years the English pound sterling with its cumbersome division of shilling and pence has been imposed upon the world because of British domination of trade and international finance, but Great Britain no longer dominates international finance as she did. The American gold dollar with its decimal system now transacts 40 per cent. of the commerce of the world. Great Britain's strongest dominion —Canada—has also adopted the gold dollar and the American decimal system. *Already four times as much wealth is measured in dollars as is measured in pounds.* I am advised by British bankers that American branch banks in London are finding greater favor with British depositors than are their own English banks. And the day is not far distant when English banks will carry their accounts in dollars and the 90 per cent. of the world's commerce and finance that is now handled by the English-speaking races and done in the English language will be expressed in terms of dollars and cents. It would therefore be wise for Germany, when she undertakes the problem of retiring her enormous paper marks issues, to adopt the gold dollar as the standard of coinage

and currency and redeem her outstanding paper marks on that basis. Her reparation loan will undoubtedly be a dollar loan and her internal financial and economic affairs will be greatly facilitated if their taxes and government revenues are collected on a dollar basis.

It is useless for individuals or nations to protest against the natural laws whose workings we can observe through human history. Individuals and races must bring themselves into line with these natural laws which make for progress and survival, or else fall behind in the struggle for racial supremacy and tend toward extinction or absorption in the progressive races. The supreme fact in the world today is that the most vigorous, the most advanced, the most progressive and the most prosperous peoples speak English.

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December 11, 1920.

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